

5. A High Quality Public Realm

The Importance of the Public Realm

The ‘public realm’ – the spaces around and between buildings including streets, squares and parks – has a major part to play in the character, attractiveness and success of any town. It is also important in encouraging sustainable modes of travel such as walking, cycling and public transport.

The creation and maintenance of a healthy public realm for Loughborough is essential to the achievement of a thriving, vibrant, sustainable and attractive Town Centre that everyone can enjoy and take pride in. As well as being able to move around easily, it is important that people feel the Town Centre is a safe and welcoming place. The Town’s key public spaces need to be versatile and provide for people from the different cultural or age groups (including children, the disabled and the elderly) who will use spaces in different ways. In addition to everyday use, the public spaces must be able to accommodate other activities, most importantly the street market and the annual November Fair but also community events, cultural activities and festivals. They need to be designed and laid out with flexibility and robustness in mind, in order to accommodate this broad range of activities and to encourage everyone to use the Town Centre at any hour – young and old, families and children.



Pedestrianised Market Street

Loughborough’s Public Spaces

The character of towns is determined as much by their spaces as by the facades of the buildings that front those spaces. Pevsner’s comment on Loughborough was that “there is little of architectural interest to see in a perambulation of the town” and, although this assessment is harsh, Loughborough does not possess the most obvious or distinguished architectural heritage. Nonetheless Loughborough has a sense of place, an individual character, which makes it an interesting and distinctive town and this is due in no small part to its public realm.

The town has been fortunate in the preservation almost complete of a series of pleasing public spaces, which open and close in turn from Bedford Square and Wards End, through Devonshire Square, the Market Place and Church Gate to the churchyard of All Saints. In addition to the churchyard and nearby Rectory Garden, two further green spaces of note, Queens Park and to a lesser degree Southfields Park, add to the Town Centre’s attractiveness and character. The fostering of the positive characteristics of all these spaces is made more important because the town’s existing buildings will not, by themselves, raise the town to visual distinction.

Over the last ten years a great deal has been achieved to improve the quality of the public realm within the Town Centre. Most notably the pedestrianisation of Market Place, Market Street and Cattle Market transformed this formerly car dominated area into an attractive pedestrian-friendly environment. Recent works to Biggin Street and Church Gate have continued these improvements and have helped to bring together the two halves of the town split by the A6. Outside these areas, however, pedestrian experiences are hampered by narrow and fragmented footways, awkward and inconvenient road crossings, excessive and inappropriate parking, and poor quality materials and street furniture provision. Even within the pedestrianised area there is a need to refresh street furniture, paving and planting, which after a decade of good service is showing the signs of its heavy usage.



Market Place

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Key Public Realm Issues

Any significant Improvements to the public realm will have to be made in parallel with the development opportunities that have been identified and with changes in the main strategic transport movements.

The key public realm issues identified are the need to:

- **Improve quality of the links between the Market Place and The Rushes; between the Leisure Centre and Queen's Park and from Southfield Road to the Market Place.**
- **Ensure that the environmental benefits that will arise following the completion of the Inner Relief Road are fully exploited in the creation of a new public space.**
- **Add to and enhance the existing network of interconnected public spaces including the improvement of pedestrian routes to the Railway Station and to the Wharf / canal side.**
- **Ensure that the new Inner Relief Road does not create a barrier to pedestrian movement and is designed to be an attractive place for people as well as an efficient route for vehicles.**
- **Ensure that new public spaces are overlooked by high quality development with active uses on the ground floor.**



Church Gate Mews



Toilets off Market Place



Proposed Wharf / Canal side



Former Barley Mow Public House



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General Design Principles for the Public Realm

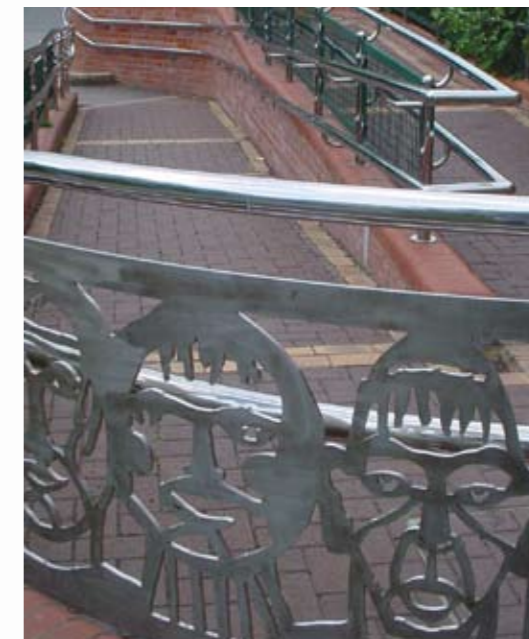
The principal objective of the Public Realm Strategy is to promote quality public spaces and routes that are attractive, convenient and safe for all. The Masterplan identifies major improvements to the existing public realm and also recognises opportunities to create a number of new, high quality public spaces and routes. These additions to the public realm will support the existing network of spaces and routes and enhance the setting of Loughborough's historic townscape and facilitate well-connected, inclusive pedestrian routes to and within the Town Centre.

The following principles will apply to the redesign of the existing public realm and the creation of new spaces and routes:

- Ensure a quality public realm by protecting and enhancing existing spaces and routes and creating new spaces and routes which respond to Loughborough's recognisable variety and hierarchy of jitties, lanes, streets, squares, parks and canal paths.
- Create pedestrian routes that are clear, direct, convenient, safe and well-signed, and can be used comfortably by everyone.
- Create cycle routes needed as part of wider links that are clear, connected, convenient and safe, and can be used without creating significant conflicts with pedestrians.
- Ensure that new public spaces and routes through developments are defined by buildings. Frontages to the public realm should be designed to be as 'active' as possible and contain windows and well-defined main entrances, and have activity generating uses on the ground floor.

- Avoid large blank elevations, unrelieved enclosures and ground level parking as they reduce the vitality and surveillance of the street.
- Ensure an integrated approach to landscape design in any development scheme. This includes co-ordinating the overall layout, access, railings, hard landscaping, lighting services, street furniture, surface materials and public art.
- Ensure that the existing biodiversity resource within the Town Centre is protected and enhanced within the public realm. Consider the scope to encourage wildlife and deliver biodiversity gain in the detailed design of spaces and landscaping.
- Promote public art and bespoke features to enhance spaces and buildings, and to add to the legibility of the public realm and the distinctiveness of the townscape.
- Provide new street furniture of a high quality, contemporary design to complement and enhance the urban context, rather than install "off the peg" reproductions of past styles. Seek 'quality' before 'quantity' in the selection of street furniture.
- Ensure that planting proposals make a specific contribution to any development - to provide interest on streets, to soften buildings, to create structures and delineation, or to establish landmarks where necessary. Promote tree planting and landscaping appropriate to the particular context. Require agreements (enforceable though appropriate planning conditions) to secure long-term maintenance of new soft landscape.

- Incorporate high quality lighting design including architectural lighting of buildings and features.
- Ensure spaces that are well lit, avoiding dark corners, with lighting designed to be in context and also to minimise 'light pollution'.
- Encourage innovative and attractive multi-use street furniture and co-ordinate all items within the public realm, including traffic and other signage, to minimise street clutter.
- Consider the need for maintenance, resistance to vandalism and access to underground services at the initial design stage in any streetscaping scheme and in the selection of street furniture, not as an after thought.
- Consider the needs of the weekly markets, the annual fair and other events and festivals in the design of public spaces.



Charnwood Museum Railings

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Strategic Public Realm Enhancements and New Public Spaces

The Masterplan identifies the need for a unified Town Centre core and provides concept designs for several public spaces. Enhancements to the public realm will both reinforce and complement the urban design and transport proposals. Together these improvements will enhance the legibility of the Town Centre for shoppers, workers and visitors. The proposals will create a series of spaces that are attractive, welcoming and accessible for all. The balance between vehicular and pedestrian priorities can be addressed through parking provision which is better integrated into the streetscape to ensure a co-ordinated design that minimises potential conflict between different users.

The designs for the public spaces will reflect the historical character of the town whilst putting forward contemporary design solutions of high quality. There is a need to have a unifying theme rather than a range of street furniture types. The choices of materials will reflect existing materials in the Town Centre and complement building facades. Integral planting can soften the interface between buildings, provide seasonal interest and diversity, whilst emphasising the newly created spaces.

Overall the approach to the design of the public realm design seeks to make the best use of Loughborough's existing assets and to create the potential for lively spaces in the centre of the town that will be welcoming to all. Hand in hand with the public realm improvements, there is a need to ensure a good mix of uses in new development that will be attractive to a wide range of groups. This is essential to avoid parts of the Town Centre becoming empty at certain times of the day or certain groups feeling marginalized and unsafe. The evening economy is important here and diversification is a key to ensuring that the 'drinking culture', and the potential for anti-social behaviour associated with it, does not dominate.

The Masterplan provides public realm enhancement concept designs for the following parts of the Town Centre.

(i) Swan Street/ High Street

At present the A6 route along High Street and Swan Street is dominated by vehicles. The town's retail heart is severed, creating a poor environment for pedestrians and discouraging business investment and growth.

Swan Street adjacent to the Market Place has the potential to become a key public space that reconnects the Town Centre. The design of this space will depend upon the implementation of the Inner Relief Road to the north of the Town Centre and whether buses are allowed to pass through the space or whether full pedestrianisation takes place.



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